

The Guilt of Suicide in the Life of a Upasampanna (Senior-status Monk)

A challenge of the Sri Lankan interpretation of
na bhikkhave attānaṃ pātetabbam yo pāteyya āpatti dukkaṭassa at Vin. III. 82
as *mahaṇeni ātma-ghātanaya no kaṭayutuyi. Yamek kereṇam dukuḷā aevaet ve.*

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Both acts of murder and suicide pertain to destruction of life [*hanati, ghātetī, ati+pātetī*] of a human, either of oneself or of another. It is declared in Buddhism that life is dear to every one [*sabbesaṃ jīvitam piyaṃ*], irrespective of its being one's own or of another. It is on this ground that Buddhism looks upon destruction of life, of any one and every one, either by oneself or through the intermediary of another as not to be undertaken. Self-example [*attānaṃ upamaṃ katvā*] is given as the best standard of judgement. Verses 129 and 130 of the Dhammapada [Dhp. vv. 129-130], if properly understood, are specific enough on this.

Sabbe tasanti daṇḍassa sabbe bhāyanti maccuno
attānaṃ upamaṃ katvā na haneyya na ghātaye.
Sabe tasanti daṇḍassa sabbesaṃ jīvitam piyaṃ
attānaṃ upamaṃ katvā na haneyya na ghātaye.

Dhp. vv. 129-30

All dread being attacked with rods and sticks
[*daṇḍa* in this context does not mean punishment].
All dread being killed. Taking oneself as an example,
kill not, nor get others to kill.
All dread being attacked with rods and sticks.
Life is dear to all. Taking oneself as an example,
kill not, nor get others to kill.

Translated by the author

All these considerations amply justify the top most priority given in Buddhism under its *sīla* or ethics of moral goodness to abstinence from destruction of life: *pāṇātipātā veramaṇī*. The Pātimokkha of the Buddhist Vinaya, in its grading of offences, however had seen the need to draw a distinction between a Buddhist monk's destruction of human life [*manussa-viggaha*] and his destroying the life of anything of a lower grade like animals, birds and beasts. The offence of *manussa-viggaha* or man-slaughter, in the categories of the Pātimokkha, has even been further pushed down, under the Pārājikas, to position No.3 [See Vin. III. 68 ff.]. Pārājika No. 1, of *methuna-dhamma* or sexual indulgence, owing to its own religio-cultural considerations, has come to occupy pride of place, jealously watching over the virtue of celibacy, guarding against offences of sexual impropriety. On account of this relative position of Pārājika No. 3 of man slaughter or *manussa-viggaha*, the killing of animals, legally gets further reduced to the level of a minor offence of Pācittiya. See Pācittiya LXI at Vin. IV. 124 f.

In spite of these modifications noted above in the assessment of the different grades of killing of humans and animals within the legal machinery of the Pātimokkha, one does not miss the Vinaya's own concern to safeguard its total outlook on Buddhism's unwavering primary attitude of respect for all life. No killing under any circumstances. We are firmly of the opinion that in the destruction of life, Buddhism also sees no difference in the life of another and the life of oneself. All life is viewed collectively in one single group of all living things: *sabbe sattā jīvitū-kāmā amaritū-kāmā* = [MN I 316]. All living things wish to continue to live. They do not wish to die. Also *sabbe tasanti daṇḍassa sabbesaṃ jīvitam piyaṃ* Dh. v. 130 = All dread being beaten with rods and sticks. All dread being killed.

Also in the monastic procedure at the conclusion of the Upasampadā ceremony, the Vinaya adds that every new upgraded monk [i.e. the new

upasampanna] should be reminded of the four *akaraṇiyāni* or never-to-be-done-at-all which includes that an *upasampanna* monk should never kill even a minute vermin like an ant or bed-bug [*kuntha-kiṭṭhika*. See Vin. I.97]. These absolute safeguards within monastic discipline should shut out of the mind of every one who has seriously entered the life of *pabbajjā*, man or woman, and that seriously in quest of the final *saṃsāric* release in Nirvana, any thoughts of destroying life of any sort.

This should necessarily shut out any argument whether the life concerned is one's own or of another. The crime of destruction of life, whether it is one's own or of another, should also carry with it the consequences thereof, i.e. its *vipāka* which has to be paid off [*paṭi-saṃvedaniya*] in this very life, or in the next one, or at any time during the long process of *saṃsāric* continuance. For this offence of man slaughter or *manussa-viggaha*, the Vinaya lays down that the miscreant shall be expelled forthright from the community [*Ayam' pi Pārājiko hoti asaṃvāso*. Vin. III. 74]. It is total ex-communication by the community, the Sangha having no religious activities like the Pātimokkha recital [*uddesa*] with him. It is believed to be more than adequate religio-institutional punishment on the miscreant. It is virtual death. But for it to be efficiently effective, it would require the collective unity of the Sangha, the entire body acting as a whole. The existence within the corpus of the Sangha of factional groups, taking sides with miscreants, would paralyse the efficient functioning of the disciplinary process of the Vinaya. It is seen happening every day, from time immemorial.

It is clear from all evidence we can gather that in Buddhism, destruction of life in the hands of humans is a very serious offence of grave consequences. It is equally offensive to the individual as well as the group, in terms of both the religio-spiritual and the socio-cultural angles. In the realm of religio-spiritual growth of the Buddhist, the one and only way to Nirvana, i.e. the Noble Eightfold Path, requires every aspirant, monk or layman, to develop and acquire at the very second stage of religio-spiritual growth, corrected ways of thinking or

sammā-saṅkappa which conform with Buddhist values. In their sequential order, they are:

- i. discipline and control over one's chase after sensory gratification or *nekkhamma-saṅkappa*,
- ii. reduction of hostility and opposition towards those besides oneself or *avyāpāda-saṅkappa* and finally
- iii. total elimination of the will to destroy, eliminate and annihilate or *avihiṃsā-saṅkappa*.

All these preliminary corrections have to be viewed as being essential attitudinal changes or self-correction in the life of the human.

The failure to bring about these corrective changes menacingly over-balances the human in his egoistic overreaches. These are what binds man to *saṃsāric* continuance. Hence they are called *upadhi* and *upādāna*. Nirvana comes about only in their total and complete elimination: *anupādā parinibbānatthaṃ*.

At this basic initial stage on the Path, one has to correctly assume that a Buddhist has acquired a reasonable command over one's will to destroy. This is the beginning of religious life in Buddhism, with an ingrained love for all life or *sabba-pāṇa-bhūta-hitānukampī* arising out of the first *sīla* injunction of *pāṇātipātā veramaṇī* [See DN.I. 63]. It is logically inferred that anything in the opposite direction springs and grows out of an over emphasized sense of self-hood or ego. This is considered to be what is most pathological in the human mind, namely *ahaṅkāra-mamiṅkāra-mānānusayā* which get finally eliminated only in the state of Nirvana.

Within this multiply vast cultural milieu of magnanimous Buddhist thinking, there could hardly be considerations of large and small, useful and less useful,

one's own or of another as far as respect for life is considered [See further Suttanipāta *vv.* 145-7]. Therefore Buddhist thinking leads us to the unavoidable conclusion that no Buddhist, with a reasonable degree of sanity in his head, could complacently come to the arrogant decision that his life is his own, individually and privately owned as it were, available to be dealt with as one likes. At the social level, Buddhism rules out this as being mere fiction. No matter what state laws in different cultures and in different parts of the world think about this. To the Buddhist, ownership of individual life has to be quite outside personal human rights. To the Buddhist, monk or layman, as man or woman, the idea of suicide or destruction of one's life, arrogantly believed to be one's own, and privately owned, is completely unacceptable.

Why are people then driven to seek the solace or comfort of suicide? According to Buddhism, it is reliably learnt that human life is all too full of trouble and turmoil [*kicchaṃ vatā'yaṃ loko āpanno ... SN II 10*]. Humans have to be religiously wise enough to know that there can never be an over-load of this *saṃsāric* suffering, from birth to death, and birth to death, again and again *ad infinitum*. Worldly existence is ever plunged in this, until one terminates it in Nirvana. It is no more than the inheritance of *saṃsāric* continuance, to be endured without complaint. When bitterness comes in the face of inability to put up with it, humans in their inborn and inherited stupidity [*avijjā-nīvaraṇānam sattānam*] plan to terminate that suffering by violently terminating their one single birth-to-death phase of it. They have neither the wish nor the ability to remember the religiously assured continuance of that suffering in definitely recurrent lives beyond death.

In spite of this cinematographic projection of the reality of life, Buddhist historical records bring before us several instances of suicides said to have been committed even by Buddhist disciples who were obviously in near-arahantship-stage. Here are at least three in number, Godhika [SN.I.120f.], Channa [SN. IV. 55f.] and Vakkali [SN.III.119f.]. Strangely enough they all come from the

Samyutta Nikaya. A fuller-detailed study of Channa's suicide is undertaken in the Channovādaka Sutta at MN.III. 263 ff. This is Sutta No. 144 of the Upari Paṇṇāsaka. Here the Buddha himself is made to confirm that Channa did commit suicide while he was assuredly in a state when he was not going to be born again. That he was therefore not going to face consequences or *vipāka*. Therefore there is neither need nor possibility of a charge being framed against him.

At SN.I,120f. the same story is told of Godhika's suicide that when he committed suicide while he was in his time-circumscribed-release [*sāmayika-vimutti*] during the seventh time. He did so through fear of falling off from that state again on account of his failing health. It had happened to him six times before. And we are told by the Buddha himself that he died without any possibility of being born again [*anāgantvā punabbhavaṃ*]. In this situation, his act of suicide would be an *ahosi kamma*, i.e. an act alone being done [*kammaṃ ahos*] without the possibility of fruition of its effects or *vipāka* [*na vipāko*].

At SN.III.119 ff. the story is identically the same about Vakkali's suicide. He also had, like Godhika and Channa, the assurance that he would not be born again. It is his aggressively severe physical pain [*ābādhiko dukkhito bālha-gilāno*] like that of Channa, seems to have led him to his suicide. Whatever be the personal life history of the monks referred to above, it appears from some of the details brought to light that public opinion, quite apart from religious considerations, did not look upon self-destruction of life, i.e. suicide as something acceptable. Thera Sariputta who knew Venerable Channa's unquestionable religious eminence, earnestly prevailed upon him not to commit suicide. But at down to earth level, Venerable Channa was obviously unable to stand up to it. Two things seem to loom large here on this issue. On the one hand, those involved, not being liable to be born again, were immune from having to pay a penalty, after death, for the crime of self-murder. However, in the world of the living from which they slipped out in a moment of weakness, they reflect a lack of

religious / spiritual courage. Being religiously safe, it matters very little to them. Better we do not sit in judgement on them. We are operating in two different realms, at two different levels.

Religions apart, in the living world of humans, people seem to claim rights over their own selves, their bodies and their minds. Right to live and right to die is their own, they claim. Many are ready to grant this. Buddhism upholds that killing oneself or killing another is killing all the same. He who kills himself is primarily guilty of man slaughter. That is why in Buddhism, even in the case of those who had reached the very end of their spiritual journeying, i.e. arahants who are not going to be born again in Samsāra and have to pay for any evil *kamma* they had committed earlier in their previous lives are subjected to questioning as to the correctness of their acts of self-killing. In all three cases of Godhika, Vakkali and Channa, they are finally declared as being religiously not guilty.

But in the world of humans, men and women are seen coming to the end of their tether, in their frustrations, in their inability to succeed in what they undertake to do, and in the face of infamies, insults and humiliations they have to suffer. Therī Sīhā [Thig. v. 80] and Thera Sappadāsa [Thag. v. 407] who in the failure of their spiritual strivings, made comparative assessments and each one severally declared that death via suicide would be relatively better than return to lay life. Their resolve in the direction of religious success was so firm and their spiritual application so steady and precise, they both soon ended up being arahants.

Here is Therī Sīhā, speaking with deep conviction, tells us of her determination to continue with her life of renunciation.

*Tato rajjuṃ gahetvāna pāvisiṃ vanamantaram
varam me idha ubbandham yañca hīnaṃ punācare.
Daḥhapāsaṃ karitvāna rukkha-sākhāya bandhiya
pakkhipiṃ pāsaṃ gīvāyaṃ atha cittaṃ vimucci me.*

Thig. vv. 80-81

Thereupon getting hold of a rope, I entered the forest,
 choosing to hang myself rather than return to lay life.
 Making a firm loop and tying it to a branch of a tree,
 I put the noose round my neck, thereupon my mind was freed.

Translated by the author

Thera Sappadāsa is equally eloquent when he says the following, that he could not abandon his life as a monk and die a layman. Better I would reach for a weapon to terminate my life. But that very moment was psychically ready and ripe enough to generate within him the required degree of detachment: *nibbidā samatiṭṭhata*.

*Satthaṃ vā āharissāmi ko attho jīvitena me
 kathaṃ hi sikkhaṃ paccakkaṃ kālaṃ kubbetha mādiso.
 Tadā'haṃ khuramādāya mañcakamhi upāvisiṃ.
 Parinīto khuro āsi dhamaniṃ chettuṃ attano.
 Tato me manasikāro yoniso udapajjatha.
 Ādīnavo pāturaḥū nibbidā samatiṭṭhata.
 Tato cittaṃ vimucci me. Passa dhamma-sudhammataṃ.*

Thag. vv. 407-10

I shall reach for a weapon to end my life.
 Of what use is my life to me.
 Abandoning my life as a monk,
 how could one like me face my end?
 Taking a razor in hand, I reached my bed.
 The razor was drawn near enough to slash a vein.
 A correct thought flashed across my mind.
 The resultant evil revealed itself to me.

Total detachment rose within me.
 My mind reached its total emancipation.
 Behold the grandeur of Truth.

Translated by the author

What is implied in both these cases seems to be more the intensity of the rejection of a possible return to lay life and continuance in Samsāra rather than the coice of suicide as a possible alternative. Unwavering total rejection of Samsāra, in the face of Nirvana, had to come: *nibbidā samatiṭṭhata*. Corrected Buddhist thinking had to emerge: *Tato me manasikāro yoniso udapajjatha*. These instances may be critically and comparatively studied together with what goes under the name of *satori* in Zen school of Buddhism in Japan.

But this escapist tendency to liberate oneself from all manner of unacceptable unpleasant situations via suicidal death, no matter under what monastic or secular provocations present themselves, appears to have lingered in Buddhist monastic history in Sri Lanka like a skeleton in the cupboard. In the Suttavibhanga, under the Parajika No.3 [at Vin.III.82], there is the story of a discontented monk who climbs the Gijjhakūṭa mountain and in an attempt to kill himself leaps from there. He had no idea where he was falling. Accidentally he fell on the neck of a basket-weaver down below, killing him in the act. The matter was reported to the Buddha. The Buddha declares that since it is an unintentional act, it does not amount to man slaughter. But such acts like leaping from or jumping off heights, the Buddha pronounces, are not to be done by monks. He stigmatises them as acts of ill-doing or *dukkata*.

A brief grammatical note: The verb used here indicating the action of the monk is *patati* which by itself means no more than falls. In its causative form *pātetī*, as used here, it means causes to fall. That means leaps or jumps off from. It is only with the prefix *ati-* added to the verb *pātetī*, forming *ati + pātetī* that the verb comes to mean kills as at Dh. v. 246 *Yo pāṇaṃ atipātetī* = He who kills a

living being.

Thus this Vinaya sub-clause *na bhikkhave attānaṃ pātetabbaṃ yo pāteyya āpatti dukkaṭassa* added to Pārājika No. 3 [at Vin. III.82] can mean no more than 'O monks, one should not leap from or jump off heights (like cliffs, trees or buildings). One who does so, is guilty of an act of ill-doing. To us, such jumping on the part of a Buddhist monk, is frivolity at its peak. No wonder that the Buddha censures it unhesitatingly.

However, the Vinaya texts of Sri Lankan tradition [Buddha Jayanti Tripiṭaka Series] sees something peculiarly strange here. They give the translation 'Mahaṇeni ātma ghātanaya no kaṭa yutuyi. Yamek ātma ghātanaya kere nam dukuḷā aevaet ve [BJTS. I (1959). p.181]. They contain no Sinhala translation whatsoever for the Pali statement *Na bhikkhave attānaṃ pātetabbaṃ. Yo pāteyya āpatti dukkaṭassa*. They apparently assume they can equate *attānaṃ pātetabbaṃ* to committing suicide. To us this rendering is both far flung and fantastic. It is equally unacceptable. In the world today, there are three Buddhist countries in Asia which share the Theravada Buddhist tradition. They are Myanmar [Burma], Thailand [Siam] and Sri Lanka. Of these three, neither the Thai rendering nor that of Myanmar appear to be guilty of this calamitous misunderstanding and misinterpretation.

Commentator Buddhaghosa seems to be unaware of any such specific deflection in the translation of the Pali word *pātetabbaṃ* in this context to equate it to suicide. He takes the original reading *na attānaṃ pātetabbaṃ* and re-phrases it to read *na attā pātetabbo* to make it read grammatically more correct, but with no serious change of meaning [*Na ca bhikkhave attānaṃ pātetabban'ti na attā pātetabbo. Vibhatti-vyattayena pana etaṃ vuttaṃ* at VinA. II. 467]. Even with this correction of Buddhaghosa, it would still specifically mean 'Let not one cause himself (*attā*) to fall (*pātetabbo*)'. This would not mean anything more than 'jump off or leap from'. Obviously no idea of self-killing at all. [** Could there have been at any stage a wild misreading *ghātetabbaṃ*, misreading unaspirate *pa* as

aspirate *ghaṅ*].

We are therefore led to conclude that this Sinhala translation of the above Vinaya sub-clause in the Pārājikā Pāli is perhaps the result of an emerging pre-Buddhaghosa endeavour [possibly with its origin in Sri Lanka] which attempts to accommodate within the monastic discipline of the Vinaya, attempts at suicide or self-killing as a minor grade offence. And therefore as an excusable, permissible and reparable minor offence. At any rate, it seems to have gained Sri Lankan national acceptance about the 10th century A.D. The Sinhala Vinaya treatise named Sika Valanda Vinisa which is believed to have been composed about this time presents this new idea precisely as ` *Miyaeṭi sitin tamā marā nam dukuḷā ve. Anun lavā tamā maravā nam dukuḷā ve.* 'This means "... He who kills himself is guilty only of a minor offence of *dukkaṭa* or ill-doing. If he gets another to kill him he is guilty of a minor offence of *dukkaṭa* or ill-doing."

It would be interesting at this stage to mention in passing that Buddhaghosa, while he appears to be holding on to the traditional literary meaning of "causes oneself to fall" for the Pali usage *na attānaṃ pātetabbaṃ*, altered by him to read as *na attā pātetabbo*, adds further ideas of a monk's wanting to kill oneself: *ettha ca na kevalaṃ patetabbaṃ na aññena'pi yena kena ci upakkamena antamaso āhārūpacchedena'pi na māretabbo*. He forbids even `fasting unto death.' [See VinA. II. 467] But he seems to deftly move between both types, the possible and impossible types of suicide.

We have shown above that about this idea of the abominable act of self-killing [*tamā marā nam* or *tamā maravā nam*], early Buddhist teachings are specific and clear. When, where and in whose hands, in Sri Lanka did it ever smuggle itself in that form into Buddhist thinking, in the Dhamma or the Vinaya? We humbly call upon the Buddhist literati, monk and layman, of Sri Lanka, to enlighten the world of Buddhist scholarship on this matter. Can suicide by an *upasampanna* Buddhist disciple be declared, within the framework of Buddhist thinking, a minor offence of *dukkaṭa* or ill-doing?